

9-2001

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Recommended Citation

Abernethy, F. E. (2001) "The Deserted Village," *East Texas Historical Journal*: Vol. 39: Iss. 2, Article 6.

Available at: <http://scholarworks.sfasu.edu/ethj/vol39/iss2/6>

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THE DESERTED VILLAGE

With apologies to Oliver Goldsmith

by *F.E. Abernethy*

Sweet Auburn! loveliest village of the plain,
Where health and plenty cheered the laboring swain,
Where smiling spring its earliest visit paid,
And parting summer's lingering blooms delayed:
Dear lovely bowers of innocence and ease,
Seat of my youth, when every sport could please...

I begin with this quotation from Oliver Goldsmith's "The Deserted Village" (1770) to emphasize the timelessness of my theme, the periodical passing of rural communities. Goldsmith was bemoaning the results of the enclosure movement, a centuries-old process by which the lords and landholders of Britain enclosed great acres of land in which to pasture sheep and grow rich in the burgeoning wool market. Land that for centuries had supported farms and families and small village towns – like Goldsmith's Sweet Auburn – now were the pastures for sheep. And the dispossessed farmers and their families were left to wander the roads and eventually swell the unemployed populations of London and Leeds. And Sweet Auburn, the "loveliest village of the plain," was left to decay back into the soil from which it came – like Lilbert and Hooks Switch and Bevilport in East Texas.

Those that were caught up in the changes of the enclosure movement in the eighteenth century looked back in romantic nostalgia to the sweet, simpler times of their agrarian youths, before this great social and cultural change that became the distinct drama of their lives.

John Henry Kirby, the legendary lumberman of East Texas, looked back with the same Goldsmithian nostalgia on his youth in the Tyler County community of Peach Tree Village, located on the edge of the Neches River bottoms.

"What happy days. How they filled the heart with a peace and tranquility never since known or felt ... there were no shylocks, no business brigands [Like John Henry Kirby himself!], none thriving ... by the fortunes and tears of men and women, or the sale of their souls to vice and infamy."

"It was at my mother's knee at Peach Tree Village that I learned the story of King Solomon's prayer for wisdom and understanding, and the beauty of the Beatitudes."

Of course, one could go one step farther back in history, when Peach Tree Village was the home and the "Sweet Auburn" of the Alabama Indians. The Alabamas deserted their Peach Tree Village under the pressures of Manifest Destiny, Anglo settlers, including John Henry Kirby's parents. The Alabamas also must have looked back with romantic nostalgia on their deserted village on the Neches River.

I hunted for thirty-five years in Sunnydell Pasture, a three-thousand-acre spread of pines and hardwoods in Tyler county. Noah Platt used to reminisce about "the Sunnydell community pasture" when those acres were an unfenced community pasture for the Sunnydell settlement. There were no fences then to keep stock within a restricted area. This was "free range" time, when people branded their cattle and notched their hogs and rounded them up when they needed the meat. The fences that were built were to keep stock *out* of an area, not in.

Noah said that he remembered a time in the 19teens when he could stand on a hill in Sunnydell and see houses and plowed fields in all directions. The land was clear of woods then and had been since the railroads had come in the 1880s and the sawmills had cut the virgin pines, except near the bottoms where Big Dry Creek and Little Dry Creek ran. East Texas farmers plowed and planted in ten and twenty acre plots: a field of corn (some to sell, most to keep), a planting of cotton (the money crop), several rows of ribbon cane (syrup was a staple), a tobacco patch, a vegetable garden.

But the center of it all was Sunnydell Community itself, which was graced with a church that also served as the school, a store left over from sawmill times (the store was also the post office), a grist mill, and a stable and blacksmith shop. Sunnydell was the least a settlement could be and still be considered a village, but it was the heart of the world for all those who lived near Billums Creek and Big Dry and Little Dry. And John Sturrock smiled in sweet nostalgia at his thoughts of growing up amidst play parties and brush arbor meetings in Sunnydell of long ago.

The deer and armadillos and Good-God woodpeckers live in Sunnydell now, and all that remains is Sunnydell Church and some nailed up tables for the annual homecoming and dinner on the grounds.

Communities are as transitory as life. Sunnydell and Peach Tree Village and Sweet Auburn are long gone, swept away by one sort of progress or another.

But each village had its time of importance, when it was a necessary part of East Texas commerce.

Riverports were built on the Sabine, Angelina, Neches, and Trinity rivers. Steamboats were plentiful on those waters and regularly at hand to haul cotton and hides down to New Orleans and the Gulf markets and bring bolts of cloth and barrels of salt back up river to Deep East Texans. Between 1830 and 1860 Bevilport in Jasper County was a bustling riverport and an incorporated community on the lower Angelina River. Sam Houston himself had a lot in Bevilport, and the town had a Main Street, a post office, a hotel, a ferry landing, and was the business and social center of that part of East Texas.²

Competing with the steamboats for river space after the 1840s were great rafts of logs that sawyers cut and floated down the East Texas rivers to the sawmills around Beaumont. Ultimately, when the rivers silted up as a result of washoff from cutover lands and trashed up with errant log rafts, steamboat

traffic diminished. Then in the 1870s, when the railroads started reaching into East Texas forests, steamboat traffic stopped completely. And Bevilport and Sabinetown near Hemphill and Pattonia in Nacogdoches County—all riverports that were vital to the East Texas commerce and economy – moldered back into the woods and are now no more than granite historical markers.

Everybody knows the story of Jay Gould and the death of the riverport of Jefferson, Texas. Jefferson—on Big Cypress Bayou, which ran into the Red River – was the leading inland port and commercial center in northeast Texas. In the late 1870s, according to the legend, Jefferson city fathers told Jay Gould that they didn't need his dirty old railroad coming through their town, and Jay Gould told the fathers that he would see the time when grass would grow in their streets. Gould then routed the Texas and Pacific railroad north of Jefferson, river traffic failed, and *grass grew in their streets*. Jeffersonians have lately recovered the town into a tourist center with Jay Gould's railroad car as the main tourist attraction.³

Jefferson had a happier ending than Homer, which was the seat of Angelina County until it also had a railroad problem. According to local legend, the town constable in Homer arrested and jailed the railroad survey crew for drunkenness and rowdy behavior, and in retaliation the survey crew backed up and bypassed Homer and ran the tracks through Lufkin instead. Consequently, Homer's doctors, lawyers, and merchants moved their headquarters to Lufkin. Then, in 1891, the county courthouse in Homer mysteriously burned down. Soon thereafter voters made Lufkin the Angelina county seat, and Homer is now a deserted village at a country crossroads.⁴

There is no telling how many sawmill communities were born and died during a century in East Texas, say from 1850 to 1950. During the great logging days, between 1870 and 1920, whole towns with churches, general stores, stables, saloons, and whore houses sprang up around the sawmills. Village Mills was a sawmill town that started in 1881 at a Village Creek crossing in Hardin County. Village Mills flourished for almost fifty years. It had a post office, train depot, a doctor's office, a community hall where the Woodmen of the World met, and a company commissary where everybody bought everything ("And I owe my soul to the company store!"). At their peak of production the sawmills turned out 175,000 board feet of lumber a day, and the residents clocked their lives by the sawmill whistles. By 1889 Village Mills had 600 residents and by 1903, when John Henry Kirby of Peach Tree Village bought the mill, it had a population of 800, 400 of whom worked at the mill. But that was tops. All of the available surrounding timber had been cut by the 1920s and the mill shut down in 1930. Village Mills post office operated until 1944, when it was moved down Village Creek to the Highway 59 crossing.⁵

Another industry that left deserted villages in East Texas – and I am sure that you have figured out by now that even though I use East Texas as an example, this "Deserted Village" phenomenon is world wide—another spawner of Sweet Auburns (said in irony) was the oil booms of the early twentieth century. Spindletop was the beginning in 1901, but Sour Lake,

Batson, and Saratoga came soon after. For ten years they drilled the holes and pumped the black gold out of the Big Thicket. Then the boom was over, and the roughnecks left. The pumps kept on a'pumping, but the towns shrank back to crossroads post offices. Following the East Texas oil field boom of the 1930s, deserted villages such as Arp and Turnertown mark the spots on the map where oil field hands populated a town then deserted it and left it to go back to a couple of filling stations and a small post office.

During the 19teens and 1920s, after the forests and the sawmill jobs diminished, East Texans moved into the cutover land and tried to scratch out a living in dirt whose only worth was to hold the world together. The average farm under cultivation was forty acres, about the most that a family could work with a mule and a Georgia stock or a team and a cultivator. So when the United States and the western world moved into the Great Depression of the 1930s, most East Texas farmers couldn't tell the difference.

I speak about this last episode of deserted villages from personal experience. I grew up in East Texas during the Depression, when the counties were still rural. And the small towns – like Jasper and Woodville and Palestine and Nacogdoches – were rural and were serving the interests of the counties' rural populations. And the small villages that were soon to be deserted were at the heart and crossroads of rural communities.

The small subsistence farms that clustered around these villages were much the same as they had been for generations. Rural people lived mostly off the land. Like their farming fathers and grandfathers, they raised cotton and some corn for their main money crop. Then for themselves and their stock – and for barter – they raised corn and maize, ribbon cane and tobacco, a yard full of chickens, some hogs and a few cows in the woods, and a vegetable garden. They made jelly out of wild grapes and plums and mayhaws. They "canned" – in Mason jars, not cans – everything that the county agent suggested was cannable. I remember being appalled at an aunt who canned some meat one time. They had smokehouses where they hung hams or buried them in barrels of salt. They stored milk and butter in lard cans that floated in a spring or a milkhouse. They ate clabber and drank buttermilk and bluejohn. They had lambs quarter in the fall and poke salad in the spring. They kept trotlines in the rivers, hunted squirrels, 'coons, and 'possums, and ambushed quails and doves and any unwary ducks and geese that came down the East Texas flyway. They ate whatever was at hand. When the corn was ripening they ate it at every meal. The same went with peas or squash or pork after a hog killing. They didn't eat much beef. They didn't necessarily eat what they wanted; they ate what they had.

Their granddaddies had supplemented their diets with deer and bear, but by the turn of the century the bear were gone and by the 1930s the deer were so scarce that people would go a mile just to look at a track.

During the Twenties and the Thirties small farming communities flourished around gins and crossroads. Lilbert, in Nacogdoches County, started as a crossroads church in 1890, but as more people began to farm the

surrounding cutover lands after the turn of the century, the village began to grow. Lilbert had its church that served Baptists, Methodists, and Presbyterians. It had a post office, a four-room schoolhouse, two general merchandise stores, a livery stable, a gin and a gristmill. I do not have a population count for Lilbert, but the census for Nacogdoches County in 1920 places 3,369 people in the town of Nacogdoches and 24,037 in the rest of the county. Eighty-eight percent of the population lived around rural communities like Lilbert. At one time – up to World War II – Lilbert and Looneyville and Linn Flatt and their kind were thriving rural villages in Nacogdoches County, like Sweet Auburn, and in these idyllic settings the children were “taught moral values, and loyalty to God, country, and man,” as one Lilbert citizen remembered. They had not yet been corrupted by city life.⁶

But during these halcyon years, the roads were unpaved, water was drawn from wells, outhouses were parts of all homescapes, and electricity stopped at the city limits of the county seat.

In 1941 in Nacogdoches County, eighty percent of the population still lived in the country. Then World War II came along and the world was turned upside down. The young men went to war, and the old men (above thirty-five years of age) went to the defense plants in the big cities, in the Golden Triangle and Pasadena and Big D. So... “How’re you gonna keep ‘em down on the farm, after they’ve seen Paree” and after they began making real money instead of barely subsisting on a frazzlin’ corn crop. And after they had lived with indoor plumbing and electricity and picture shows and grocery stores. The rural population in Nacogdoches County dropped 10,000 people between the War Years and 1950. The last gin in Nacogdoches County was shut down in 1950, about the same time as the sawmills blew their last whistle. That part of East Texas social history was over.⁷

The villages that furnished the necessities for these rural populations – the settlements that were the crossroads of their rural lives – began to shrink back to the original state of nature. And the small surrounding farms were sold to Kirby Lumber Company or Champion or International, and they too went back to fields of pine trees and sweet gums. Lumber companies bought a lot of farm land and let it go back to raising trees – which accounts for the fact that now East Texas has wild game again: deer and turkeys, and panthers are back and somebody has reported seeing bear.

That march of progress, however, that deserted the most rural villages was the development of the Texas farm-to-market road program. The program began in the early 1940s under W. Lee O’Daniel, was postponed during the war, and was finalized with the Colson-Briscoe Act of 1949. This act not only established a state program for paving country roads, but provided the money to get Texas farmers “out of the mud.” The purpose of the FM program was to provide paved roads for school busses and rural mail and milk routes. But it did more, much more to the rural environment. The FM system as it developed after WWII allowed people to move easily from their farms to the market place. But it also allowed a whole hell of a lot of farmers to move into town

and drive daily (and easily, without getting stuck in the mud or a sand bed) to their farms. Farmers could now live in the towns, near schools and picture shows and grocery stores, and still be farmers.⁴

One other result of the FM program was the consolidation of school systems and the bussing of children into the town systems. Lenvill Martin, the Nacogdoches county school superintendent, said, "We're not destroying the communities; we're moving them into town." The result was the same, however. East Texas saw the demise of the rural school system and the little red schoolhouse – and the demise of the small settlements that were built around these rural schools.

The whole farming picture was changing during the Forties and Fifties. The more successful farmers needed more land to make more money, and they began enlarging their holdings. The shift in East Texas agriculture began after the war when the average farmer was no longer a subsistence farmer living mostly off his land and barely getting by, but was a farming business man who looked to make money out of his investment in agriculture. In East Texas the move was away from traditional cotton farming to cattle raising and dairying and poultry farming and truck farming. And the crossroads village became a thought for nostalgia.

I conclude in this present time. Progress is still making deserts of our villages.

We in Nacogdoches look back in romantic nostalgia to our own Sweet Auburn, which was downtown Nacogdoches before the war and before progress turned one of our most beautiful streets, North Street, into a copy of every treeless, tasteless, fast-food strip in the United States. Also we have a Main Street problem. At one time Main Street in downtown Nacogdoches (and you can substitute the name of any other comparable East Texas town, including Beaumont – in *particular*, Beaumont!) was the center of civic life, where everybody came to buy, sell, and conduct the business that keeps a community alive. We had theatres, cafes, drug stores, barber shops, 5&10 cent stores, grocery stores, hardware stores, all sorts of clothing stores. Lawyers, doctors, surveyors, and other professionals officed above the retail stores, and were only a short block away from the post office, county courthouse, the city offices, and the police department. Coffee groups gathered morningly downtown at appointed places in the drugstores and cafes for the conduct of city gossip and business. Old men clumped together on the sidewalk to talk and spit tobacco just past the curb. The young dragged Main Street in their jalopies to see and be seen. And on Saturdays, everybody went downtown, sent the kids to a Buck Jones movie, and consumed frozen malts and cherry cokes. Nacogdoches had a thriving downtown that was the heartbeat of the town and its county.

Downtown Nacogdoches is now almost as pathetic as Goldsmith's deserted village. It consists of antique stores, junk shops, law offices and two bank buildings that take up large parts of their blocks. It appeals to tourist traffic, which has become a major focus for this and many other towns. The

surviving real businesses, like JC Penney's and Beall Brothers, have moved away to suburban malls; and Wal-Mart, two miles from downtown, has just about gobbled up the markets from all the other downtown stores that once furnished the necessities for our daily lives.

The villages that are now being deserted are the downtown Mainstreets all over East Texas and the USA. This was a natural phenomenon. The 7-11 stores made the move early and found that setting up shop in the midst of a suburban neighborhood was good business. They provided services that relieved their neighbors of a trip downtown. Other businesses soon joined them in early strip malls. And finally, huge Wal-Marts and many-acred malls were built to house all of the businesses to provide all of the "stuff" that this affluent society needs or wants. And now nobody goes downtown to shop. We live in a world of deserted Main Street villages.

It is nothing but natural that we look back in romantic nostalgia to those simpler, richer times – to "Sweet Auburn! loveliest village of the plain" – and to Peach Tree Village, where "the heart was filled with a peace and tranquility never since known or felt" – and to Lilbert, where folks learned the proper "moral values, and loyalty to God, country, and man." The world and life did seem better and simpler and happier then, when we still had a continuing connection with "the old home place" and when we had a real "hometown" where everybody knew and visited with everybody else – where people had an easily identifiable place and purpose.

A couple of 1930s songs that we sang during WWII reflect this homesickness that I guess is a part of everybody's escape system: "Little Green Valley" (Lilbert, Melrose) and "Good Old Texas Home."

NOTES

¹Bob Bowman, *The Towns We Left Behind* (Diboll, TX. 1972), p. 21.

²*New Handbook of Texas* (Austin, 1996), I, pp. 514-15.

³*New Handbook of Texas*, III, pp. 924-25.

⁴*New Handbook of Texas*, III, pp. 679-80.

⁵Bob Bowman, *The 35 Best Ghost Towns in East Texas* (Lufkin, 1988). pp. 21-26. W.T. Block, *East Texas Mill Towns & Ghost Towns*, I-III (Lufkin, 1997).

⁶James Partin, Archie P. McDonald, Joe and Carolyn Ericson, *Nacogdoches: The Story of Texas' Oldest Town* (Lufkin, 1995), census p.145; Carolyn Ericson, editor, *Nacogdoches County Families* (Nacogdoches, 1985), p. 63-64.

⁷Archie P. McDonald, editor, *Nacogdoches: Wilderness Outpost to Modern City, 1779-1979* (Nacogdoches, 1980), p. 100.

⁸Kirk Kite, *History of the Texas State Department of Highways and Public Transportation* (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of New Mexico, 1981), pp. 127-131.